

European *Balkan(s)*, Turkic *bal(yk)* and the Problem of Their Original Meanings

Marek Stachowski
Jagiellonian University, Poland

Since most European students of Turkic linguistics start their university training with a course of Turkish they first learn that the Turkish word *balyk* ⟨balık⟩ means ‘fish.’ It therefore stands to reason that they feel most surprised when they are told in an Old Turkic course that *balyk* means both ‘wall’ and ‘town, city’ in Old Turkic. One can hardly understand how three meanings as different as ‘fish’ and ‘wall’ or ‘town’ are expressed by one and the same word, and thus the idea immediately suggests itself that at least one of these words is probably (or certainly) borrowed into Old Turkic from a foreign language that is apparently unknown to the student. Besides, there is only one possible phonetic association, that with Turkish *bal* ‘honey’ but this does not seem to make much sense.

Also a look into ÈSTJa II does not solve the problem. First of all, the difference between Turkic *balyk* ‘wall; town’ and *bālyk* ‘fish’ (ÈSTJa II 59) is somewhat artificial. One cannot see why the former word should be read with a short vowel if, in the Arabic script, only one attestation without *elif* (i.e. ⟨bliq⟩) and as many as six notations with *elif* (i.e. ⟨bāliq⟩ ~ [twice:] ⟨bālq⟩ for *bālyk*, ⟨bāliḥ⟩ ~ ⟨bālḥ⟩ for *balyh*, and ⟨bāliḡ⟩ for *balyg*) are adduced in ÈSTJa. Of course, a graphematic argument cannot be considered conclusive; nevertheless, this proportion does not suggest the reading with a short -a-, as opposed to *bālyk* ‘fish.’ Rather, one is tempted to posit a long -ā- in both words. But, then, the question arises whether we have to deal

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with polysemy (*bālyk* ‘1. wall; town; 2. fish’) or homonymy (*bālyk* 1 ‘wall; town’; *bālyk* 2 ‘fish’). Because the vowel length in these words can be also secondary (see [1] and [4] below) we are going to write just ⟨a⟩ and to ignore the question of vowel length in what follows.

Three ideas suggested by four scholars concerning the origins of *balyk* ‘fish’ have been published hitherto. The oldest is by László Rásonyi who connected this word with the verb *balk(y)*- ‘to shimmer, glimmer, twinkle.’ Èrvand V. Sevortjan is absolutely right when dismissing this explanation as morphologically well nigh impossible (ÈSTJa II 60) since a derivative of *balk(y)*- would have been **balkyk* rather than *balyk*. Martti Räsänen (VEWT 61b) does not, in fact, suggest any solution at all because his reconstructions **baluk* or **balyk* say nothing about the original structure and meaning of the word (in essence, they do not even convey any real information about its original phonological make-up) and the rapprochement of the Turkic word with both Kalmuk *balγǎ zaγǎšn* ‘eine Fischart; ? Brassen’ and Manchu *falū* ‘eine Art Brassen’ does not help a Turkologist in any way. The third etymology was first suggested by S. P. Tolstov (1947; cited after ÈSTJa II 60) who thought of a connection of *balyk* ‘fish’ with words like *bal* or *bar* ‘water reservoir, esp. one of stagnant water on swampy and clay soil.’ È. V. Sevortjan picked up this idea, pursued it with further examples (e.g. Kazakh dial. *bal* ‘small ditch’ ~ *balgy* ‘foam, scum’; Azeri dial. *balax* ‘sedge at a pond or stream bank,’ Yakut *baltyj-* ‘to churn up water,’ Kirghiz *balčylda-* ‘to squelch in water’) and concluded that a nominal-verbal root **√bal(-)* must have existed in Proto-Turkic whose nominal variant is represented by Kazakh dial. *bal* ‘small ditch’ (ÈSTJa II 60). The problem, however, is that the verbal variant **bal-* is not reflected as such in any Turkic language.

As for *balyk* ‘wall; town,’ a popular opinion is that this is a derivative formed from a word for ‘clay.’ In ÈSTJa II 59 a word *bal* ‘clay’ is admittedly adduced, probably attested in Saryg Uyghur (the notation in ÈSTJa l.c. is not entirely unambiguous) but it seems to be a hapax. On the other hand, the standard words for ‘clay’ are *balyk* and *balčyk* in Turkic, both clear derivatives of **bal* whose meaning must, indeed, have somehow been connected with ‘clay.’

Clauson (1972: 335sq.) does not give any etymology at all for either of these words, this being unfortunately a standard situation rather than an exception in what he has called an *etymological dictionary*.

For Turkic *bal* ‘honey’ Clauson (1972: 330a) says “[i]t is generally agreed that this is a very early l.-w. fr. [= loan-word from] some Indo-European language, dating fr. [= from] a period when *m-* was so unacceptable as an initial that it was replaced by *b-*.” This is generally a correct report on the state-of-the-art although nobody knows when this mysterious “period” began and, what is even worse, when it ended, because even Russian words borrowed into Siberian Turkic languages – a process that began only in the 17th century – were sometimes subject to the *m-* > *b-* change (cf. Russian *matrác* ‘mattress’ > Tuvian *matrās* ~ *batrās* id. [Schönig 2002: 263]) but also a reverse change of *b-* > *m-* is known (e.g. Russian *peč* ‘oven’ > Tobolsk-Tatar *müts* id. [Anikin 2003: 448]). And this means that nobody can establish the *terminus ante quem* of the borrowing of the Indo-European word for ‘honey’ into Turkic, so we have no grounds to say this was a very early loanword.

Worse still, what Clauson (op. cit.) says in the remainder of his entry is in no way acceptable: “The closest IE parallel is Latin *mel*; the Sanskrit form is *madhu*.” First of all, Latin *mel* and Sanskrit *madhu* are two different words so that *madhu* cannot just be viewed as a Sanskrit variant of Latin *mel* (cf., e.g., Smoczyński 2007: 382). Besides, the Proto-Indo-European form is generally reconstructed as **melit* (> Hittite *militt-*, Greek *méli*, *-tos* id.) whereas Latin *mel*, *mellis* ‘honey’ goes back to Proto-Italic **meli*. The origin and the exact mechanism of the emergence of Latin *mel* are still unclear and in dispute (de Vaan 2008: 370). At any rate, both the geography and the chronology of a Latin or even a Proto-Italic influence upon Proto-Turkic cannot be possibly viewed as self-evident; on the contrary, it requires proof. However, Clauson does not elaborate on this idea at all.

In addition, nobody seems to have ever explained why Proto-Indo-European **-e-* should have been changed into Proto-Turkic **-a-*.

All in all, against this background, the Indo-European origin of Turkic *bal* ‘honey’ appears more than highly questionable.

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My own opinion on the etymology and interrelations of the words presented above can be put as follows:

- [1] Turkic *bal* ‘honey’ is a genuine Turkic word whose protoform was **bal* (or, maybe, **bāl*, if the notation ⟨bāl⟩ in the Arabic script in 11th century Turkic comparative dictionary by Mahmud Kashgari is to be taken literally; compare, however, Turkmen *bal*, not **bāl*; see also [4] below). Its modern meaning ‘honey’ is secondary, the original one being rather **‘mud, clay; thick, gluey and kneadable substance.’*

The word *bal* produced a few derivatives, and some other words were wrongly supposed, in the history of Turkic linguistics, to go back to *bal* ‘honey.’ Two such examples are adduced in ÈSTJa II 47, unfortunately amongst correct derivatives and without a clear explanation of their incorrectness. These are: [1a] Hungarian *bálmos*, Ukrainian *bánuš* ‘a sort of dish, resembling Rumanian *mămăligă*’ (although no honey is used in its production) that in reality reflects Turkish *bulamaç* ‘puree, mash, pulp, porridge’ < *bula-* ‘to roll in flour; to stir, mix’ (Stachowski 2012: 194) and [1b] Rumanian *bali(e)mez* ‘a very heavy howitzer’ < Turkish *balyemez* id. < German *Faule Metze*, an ironical name of a heavy howitzer in Brunswick (Kissling 1951: passim); if this Turkish word was connected with *bal* ‘honey’ the word *balyemez* would have literally meant ‘it does not eat honey’ – indeed, a weird name for a howitzer, one is inclined to ask what it is that is distinguished from a howitzer solely by the fact that does eat honey.

- [2] One of the derivatives of **bal* is Turkic *balčyk* ‘mud’ with its +čyk suffix forming diminutives that have both the standard meaning ‘small X’ and a less frequent one: ‘quasi X.’ Thus, the etymological meaning of *balčyk* ‘mud’ was approximately ‘quasi *bal*,’ that is something resembling a thick and gluey

substance.

- [3] The Turkic word for ‘wall; town’ is generally adduced as *balyk* or, sometimes, also *baluk* or *balyg*, at any rate, as a bisyllabic word. Mahmud Kashgari, however, attests also a monosyllabic variant *balk*, typical of the pronunciation of some Oghuz tribes (ÈSTJa II 59). Even if he criticizes it as incorrect we should reckon with the possibility that the vowel in the second syllable is secondary, i.e. **bal* > **balk* > *balyk*. This is, however, somewhat uncertain because an epenthetic vowel would generally be expected to become a moveable one (as, for instance, in Turkish *oğul* [acc. *oğlu*, not **oğulu*] ‘son’ < Proto-Turkic **ogul* < **okl* < **ok* > Oyrot, Tuvinian *uk* ‘progeny, offspring’) which is not the case with *balyk* <balık> (acc. *balyğy* <balığı> not **balgy*). Thus, the protoform of this word may tentatively be suggested as **bal(y)k* ‘wall made of clay’ > ‘1. wall(s) > 2. town,’ its etymological-morphological meaning being something like ‘clay-thing.’
- [4] For Turkic *balyk* ‘fish’ I would like to suggest that the word originally concerned the tench or some other species preferring waters with muddy or clayey bottom. This meaning was generalized over the course of time, a process due to migrations of the Turkic peoples that made more and more fish genera known to them.

The fact that Turkmen *bālyk* and Kyzyl-Khakas *pālyx* point both to a long vowel in the first syllable (cf. [1] above) does not prove much because Turkic low vowels often tend to lengthening before syllables with -y- or -i-. Thus, the vowel length can be secondary in both examples, particularly in view of the fact that the length in Turkmen *bālyk* is *not* corroborated by the short vowel in Turkmen *bal* ‘honey.’

In short: The Proto-Turkic word **bal* ‘mud; clay; thick and gluey substance’ produced three derivatives (**balčyk* ‘mud’; **bal(y)k* ‘wall; town’; **balyk* ‘(?) tench’ > ‘fish’) and then changed its meaning into ‘honey.’

However, before the semantic shift of Proto-Turkic **bal* took

place one more derivative must have come into being, namely **balyk* ‘*swamp(land), marsh’ > **swampy forest*.’ It was the latter meaning that formed a semantic basis of a new derivative: **balyk + an* > *balkan* ‘wooded mountain(s)’ (this is the traditional translation but a collective meaning like **‘mountains with swampy forests’* is probably more correct), and this derivative lives on even today in the internationally known geographical term: the *Balkan(s)* (Eren 1987: 118 sq.).

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Marek Stachowski
 Institute of Oriental Studies
 Faculty of Philology
 Jagiellonian University in Kraków, POLAND
 <stachowski.marek@gmail.com>